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ABSTRACT

The experiences, attitudes, and needs of three literacy learners and one paid literacy teacher in Melbourne, Australia, were examined. The analysis was framed by the following principles: (1) literacy is a feminist issue; (2) adult literacy education is best defined as broad, general education that is grounded in language and fosters depth and breadth in connections and critical thinking; and (3) policy forums must give more consideration to the voices of women adult literacy learners and teachers. The three women literacy learners ranged in age from 19 to 54 years. One was a Muslim women learning English as a second language. The study conclusions were as follows: (1) Australian women literacy learners need sustained learning and sustained opportunity to develop the power of critical thinking through reading, writing, and speaking English; (2) women literacy learners need a choice of settings, including community-based agencies; technical and further education institutes, and women-only groups; (3) the texts women literacy learners use and create should open new understandings and new knowledge of the world they live in; and (4) women literacy teachers need regular paid professional development opportunities to reflect deeply, with other teachers, on the theory and practice of adult literacy education. (8 references) (MN)

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ED 473 583

Paper Title **Women and Literacy in Australia.**

Author Helen Macrae and Jacinta Agostinelli: Glenroy Neighbourhood House Learning Centre

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Abstract

This paper is Jacinta's account of women learning and teaching literacy in Australia today. To write the paper Helen and Jacinta framed questions focusing on a number of aspects of women and literacy and discussed them with members of Women in Adult and Vocational Education (WAVE) at Glenroy Neighbourhood Learning Centre (GNLC), a key adult literacy teaching agency in Melbourne's inner north for the past 25 years. Through the stories of three women at the centre, Helen and Jacinta to document the experiences of four women - three learners and a paid teacher. Helen and Jacinta draw conclusions about four fundamental principles for women's literacy learning.

Framing This Paper

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To write this paper we framed questions and discussed them with members of Women in Adult and Vocational Education (WAVE) at Glenroy Neighbourhood Learning Centre (GNLC), a key adult literacy teaching agency in Melbourne's inner north for the past 25 years.

What kind(s) of literacy are we thinking about for this paper? Reading, writing, numeracy, science, technology, emotions, public life, democracy?

Do specific women's issues - domestic violence, inequity in the labour market, child birth and so on - impinge on women and literacy? How?

What stories cast light on women as literacy learners? Why do they come? What dreams? What circumstances do they wrestle with?

Most literacy teachers (90%?) are women. What are their issues for curriculum in its broadest sense - boundaries, content, teaching practice? What qualities does a good literacy teacher of women need? Why are there so few men teaching literacy? Low pay rates? Unease with a demanding teaching task that calls on an ability to nurture as well as free the learner? What are the opportunities and threats for women in literacy teaching?

What system-wide issues have an impact for good or bad on women as teachers/learners/managers in the literacy field? Structures for delivery, curriculum development, resources, funding policies, certification, professional development?

What other/better questions, can we ask about women and literacy?

What impact will literacy (ies) have on women's lives - public, private and work - in the

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next few years?

The women who attended the discussion set three parameters for this paper.[i]

Feminism

Women in Adult and Vocational Education is a national feminist network for women who work and study in Australian adult and vocational education. We provide advice and advocacy on behalf of members; promote social justice and equity in and through adult and vocational education; build areas of mutual cooperation with other organisations; and undertake research. [ii]

Joan Kirner says feminism is the belief that "women matter as much as men" [iii] In material co-authored with Moira Rayner she argues that institutions must change so that power is shared between women and men, opportunities are shared equally between men and women, and all are treated justly and fairly.[iv]

Whether you are a man or a woman, whether you call yourself a feminist or not, if you have a vision for a just ACE (adult and community education) and VET (vocational education and training) sector, if you want power distributed more equally, and if you work for equal opportunity for women and men as learners and teachers in ACE and VET, then WAVE shares your vision.

Literacy is a feminist issue. If women are under represented in government funded literacy programs, for example, the interests of equal opportunity are not served.

Literacy

We take the view that terms such as visual literacy, economic literacy, emotional literacy and technical literacy are unhelpful *if* their use draws attention, resources and effort away from the critical importance of the skills and knowledge required to read written text, generate written text, and use spoken words to communicate effectively.

Now it is true that language, whether spoken or recorded in text, needs content and context to give it meaning. Visual, scientific, political, artistic, and relationship skills and knowledge belong to a definition of literacy in as much as they give essential meaning and context to speech and to language based text. They are also, in themselves, modes of communicating meaning through the generation of texts.
We wish to define and affirm adult literacy education as *a broad, general education grounded in language* which fosters depth and breadth in connections and critical thinking. The competency approach, which drives vocational education, limits the scope of adult literacy teaching.

The ground of lived experience

The voices of women adult literacy learners and teachers, too often absent from policy forums, should be given the central space in this paper.

The funds provided allowed us to document the experiences of four women - three learners and a paid teacher. The teacher is Jacinta Agostinelli who wrote the following account of women learning and teaching literacy in Australia today.

The Learners

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Lyn Black is 19. She comes to my CGEA (Certificates in General Education for Adults) class twice a

week at Glenroy Neighbourhood Learning Centre. The Glenroy centre used to be an old factory and our class is in a back room with no windows. Last year Lyn and a pre-service teacher spent part of a semester break painting a window onto the wall. Now we have a room with a view.

In the Glenroy resource room there we have some locally produced books called *Stories from the Broadmeadows Women's House* by the Creative Writing Group. Several of the telling tales are written by Katy Lea, who is 54. Broadmeadows Women's House is a women only venue at the end of a quiet cul-de-sac and I had to get special dispensation to bring my male pre-service teacher in last year. I am being humorous - the request was more through courtesy than because there was an issue. In fact immersing a young male teacher of the future into a women only environment and into the feminised occupation of teaching was a positive step. His biggest problem was that there were no bathroom facilities for him!

Mona Al-Rostrum, a 44 year old Muslim woman in my ESL Literacy class removes her scarf once she's inside Broadmeadows Women's House. She didn't go to school in Lebanon and now wants to learn English so she can understand the culture that is absorbing her two boys. But with one class a week time moves more quickly than her learning. Her oldest son has just turned 16. Mona brings laughter and energy to the class.

The three classes the women attend all have a reputation for being *Raucous*, and the creative writing class is described as *Raunchy* and joyful as well. Who needs the three Rs when these two are enough! Planning the curriculum for the classes is not a difficult task, but it takes time, resources and reflection - both the structured reflection obtained through professional development and meetings with other teachers, and the automatic reflection that occurs when you are packing up at the end of the class. Lessons can't be lifted from a textbook. They have to address the needs of the students, which include needs specific to women.

In the hour long interview I conducted with each of them, the three women talked about their lives in relation to their literacy. I used the questions listed at the beginning of this paper to shape the interviews, as well as questions that presented as we were talking. Why are these women in my literacy classes? What life experiences led them here and what do they want from the classes? How do they define literacy and how does that definition affect my teaching and the outcomes? How does the system we work within extend or limit our aspirations?

The women's definitions of literacy are similar. Lyn describes it in terms of spelling, feeling good about herself, and being open to new ways of looking at life. She says of her mother, who left school early, "she couldn't read and write big words, she couldn't spell she didn't have the opportunity to read and write". For Lyn, not having a large vocabulary and not being able to spell are barriers to learning to read and write. Literacy is also about having the power to help others and helping others is a way to feel good. She says, "If I can spell a word I can help out the other students. Helping someone means a great deal to me". Literacy classes have enabled her to open her mind, "Coming here has opened up a lot of ways of thinking about things..." Perhaps the window on the wall is symbolic of Lyn's idea of literacy.

Katy uses the same metaphor throughout her narration. She says that the first creative writing class "opened my eyes" and "Reading and writing is life education, hearing about other people's lives, knowing I'm not alone, an opening of the mind to other people". According to Katy literacy is also learning about the basics. Young girls like herself and her mother had their education "curtailed" by early pregnancies. They need the opportunity to catch up on the "basics" before pursuing more vocational and advanced education. Katy also uses the metaphor of a journey when describing literacy. The creative writing class started Katy's "journey to education". Literacy has helped Katy move on in life.

For Mona Al Rustrom, an ESL student, literacy is about understanding the English language and texts to maintain her relationship with her children. If she can understand the culture her children are

growing up in she believes she can protect her family from the problems that many immigrant families face when their children live in two cultures. She says, "I learn English because I have to know about my kids, I have to know the child's teacher, how he learns, how in the future he do something." Her literacy helps Mona to understand her children's world.

For the learners themselves literacy is about having the skills to read, write and speak the texts of their culture so they can participate in it and not "be a nobody" (Katy Lea). Learning to read and write brings an excitement, a sense of *I can do it, I can now join in with life*. The student develops confidence and wants "to get up early in the morning" (Lyn Black) and begins to open her mind to new ways of doing and seeing. Before coming to classes these students saw reading and writing as something they couldn't do, a secret they didn't get to know because of their life experiences. We can't afford to ignore the importance of the students' traditional definition of literacy. It is primarily about learning to read and write in the dominant discourse of one's culture so one can participate in that culture. It is a simple definition that reduces the emphasis on other literacies such as visual, economic, emotional and technical literacies. It is also a view that supports the use of resources for general education. Presently funding favours vocational education, but these women speak of the importance of the literacy class in getting them "launched" (Katy Lea).

It is at this point that you might ask what issues in these women's lives have shaped their definition of literacy, and their decision to join a literacy class? What are their aspirations for the future? It should be that awareness of the issues faced by women and awareness of their future aspirations will influence the decisions of teachers and policy makers who work in the field of adult literacy.

Both Katy Lea and Lyn Black experienced neglect and emotional abuse as children and adolescents. Being a girl, Katy Lea was left to care for herself and her two younger sisters when her mother left the family. She married just after finishing school. Although she excelled at learning she didn't reach her potential because of the burden of caring for younger sisters and her early marriage. Her husband was abusive and gambled and she was trapped in the marriage until her two children had grown up. Katy developed depression and low self esteem. For months on end she didn't leave the house except to shop. An advertisement in a local paper for a writing class at the Broadmeadows Women's House drew her away from Bert Newton on daytime TV and she thought of the literature and Shakespeare prizes she'd won at school. In that first class she started writing and she says "everything I had buried for years and years came to the surface. It was a cathartic experience". In the writing class Katy learnt the art and techniques of modern writing and is now doing the *Course in Writing and Editing* at Swinburne University by distance education. She has also been published in women's magazines. Her dream is to finish the writing course and to continue publishing stories.

For Katy the writing class was an opportunity to return to life. It was the beginning of her "journey to education" and gave her confidence to "get out of the house". The fact that the class was in an all women environment, in a local neighbourhood house, "a house not unlike the house she lives in" made it easier for her. Had the class been at the TAFE institute Katy might never had taken the first step on that journey. She says a TAFE institute would have intimidated her at a time when she needed nurturing and support.[v] She got that nurturing through the staff, the other women, and the comfort of the smaller Women's House. Accessibility was also a necessity as Katy didn't have a car. Many women in her circumstances don't, she said.

What educators need to hear in Katy's story is the significance of the women only nurturing environment where non-vocational literacy classes that are easily accessed are offered. This is what women with low self esteem, who may also be coming out of an abusive marriage, need when they take the first steps in returning to education.

Lyn feels that her literacy was affected by emotional abuse and difficulties at school. She spent many nights as a child "under the table in the local hotel while her mother partied". Her mother was an alcoholic and was only sixteen when she had Lyn. Lyn repeated the cycle and had two pregnancies

and abortions at sixteen. She felt the teachers at school didn't care about her learning and, she says, they refused to give her extra help when she asked for it. So she left school and home and used drugs to cope with life. She worked for three months in administration but lost her job because she "couldn't write properly and...couldn't spell the words she needed when taking telephone messages". Two years later Lyn was given another chance at education and joined our Reading and Writing class. One day she hopes to be in a stable, interesting job where she can meet many different people.

It is easy to relate Lyn's definition of literacy to her life experiences, especially those specific to being a woman. In the context of a community learning centre with its supportive teachers and manager, Lyn has come to see literacy as opening her mind to new ways. Small mixed ability classes have restored her belief in herself as a learner, empowered her to join the one of the centre's committees and to use her initiative to implement change within the centre. Lyn's story illustrates how the context of the community managed learning centre is important in providing women with a way back into education and into life. Her involvement on the committee exemplifies how the literacy class can be a means for achieving the equity of power between men and women that feminism calls for.

There was no education for girls where Mona Al Rustrom grew up on the border of Lebanon and Syria. Being a Muslim woman she is more comfortable in all women classes and is sometimes "embarrassed" in male company. Because she didn't drive for many years the accessibility of the Women's House was important to her, as was the attached child care facility. Child care is an issue for Mona and for many of the women who use the Women's House. Onsite child care is useful for women with a language other than English background who may find it difficult to access regular child care centres because of cultural preferences or problems with language. Economic reasons also prevent many women in Broadmeadows from using council and private child care facilities. Occasional child care is not subsidised in regular centres, but it is at the Women's House, making it both affordable and convenient. It's also a positive for the children who might otherwise have limited opportunities for socialisation or for acquiring English. I asked Mona where she would like to be in five years time. She replied she wants to be at home happily with her family and living in a peaceful world. The whole context of The Women's House is integral to Mona's participation in literacy classes and to the realisation of her future aspirations.

The Teachers

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So far this paper has focused on how three women learners view their literacy and what issues in their lives have given rise to that view. It is time now to look at women who teach in literacy and to see what the issues are for them. I'm going to assume I am representative in most aspects.

I am in my third year of teaching, that is teaching anything. I am probably atypical there, as most of the women I work with have been teaching for many years. I am 43 and teach on a sessional basis. I have a family and was out of the work force while my children were growing up. This means my partner's career has got, and still does get, precedence over mine. I sometimes find it difficult to reconcile my desire to advance my career as a teacher, with being the primary carer of my family, particularly in times of illness among family members.

I chose to teach literacy for three main reasons. First I believe that not all people are given an equal chance at literacy. There are some groups of people who are disadvantaged through no fault of their own and do not get the same chance to learn to read and write as other groups do. When literacy is your ticket to the future and when our society measures a person's value by their level of literacy, the situation we have is unfair. I thought that by becoming a literacy teacher I could do something about this inequity. Second, I enjoy nurturing people, like many women do. Lyn Black says that helping other people makes her feel good. It makes me feel good too. And third, I thought there would be plenty of opportunity for part time work in community education, so I wouldn't feel I was abandoning my family altogether.

There are a few issues here. One is to do with part time and sessional work. There is less stability with sessional work because jobs can be terminated if funding or demand is reduced. Another problem is I get paid only for the hours I teach, yet I believe the preparation for the class is as important as the teaching. There is no holiday or sick pay with sessional work. Some teachers have to claim unemployment benefits during the long Christmas vacation. Because many teachers in community education are women and have to share themselves between family and work, there is little time, energy or focus left to spend on changing our conditions. I am pleased to say however that I am a union woman!

The busyness of our centre and the coming and going of teachers directly before and after classes means there is little time for informal discussion and reflection on teaching with other professionals in the field. This is a further issue related to sessional work.

The amount of nurturing required in an adult literacy class can be an issue too, so I think it is important to have clear boundaries of your role. A literacy class is not the place for students to disclose their experiences in a therapeutic way. I believe it is rather, a place where students can restore their self confidence and self esteem through positive learning experiences. The three students interviewed are good examples of this view at work. As a teacher however, it is crucial that I have an appreciation of how the students' past and present lives impact on their learning. My efficacy as a teacher of adult literacy is dependent on my understanding that most students have experienced social, emotional, sexual or physical abuse, or have mental health or learning problems which have impacted on their ability to learn. With the right sort of class environment and the right theoretical approaches, I believe students can overcome their barriers to some extent and improve their reading and writing. They discover as Lynne Kosky, our Minister for Education says, "that they can do it". [vi]

There are two major aspects to my teaching. One is the confidence building, nurturing role I have just described, which tends to be a more comfortable role for women than for men. This, as well as the low pay, demanding hours and lack of career structure explains why adult and vocational education is a female dominated field. For this reason it is good to see our teacher training institutions encouraging young male pre-service teachers into adult education settings as part of their teacher training. It is even better to be able to give future male teachers the opportunity to teach in a women's venue where they are exposed to the realities that women grapple with daily, the issues of child care, domestic violence, isolation, low self esteem, and abuse in its varied forms.

A second aspect is the fact that I am there, first and foremost, to teach language. The three students interviewed all expressed frustration with not knowing the mechanics of the primary language of their culture. The not knowing became a barrier to their full and rightful participation in the workforce and in the community. If I do not plan my curriculum around the language needs of my students I am not helping them to achieve the independence as a learner and as a citizen they crave for and deserve.

This brings me to the last discussion of this paper: what are the system wide issues that impact on women in literacy? Some mention has already been made of structures for delivery so discussion will concentrate now on curriculum development, funding policies, certification and professional development.

Funding for literacy education in TAFE institutes and Adult Community Education (ACE) is on the basis of student contact hours. ACE agencies receive $5.61 per student contact hour and are not funded for sufficient hours for many students to work successfully through the Certificate in General Education for Adults (CGEA), especially if students are dealing with family life or personal matters. When the women in my classes are dealing with issues that have affected their learning, that learning is going to be slow. It cannot be fast tracked.

The CGEA itself is a valuable framework. Grounded in genre theory, which developed from Systemic Functional Linguistics, the Reading and Writing Stream of the CGEA encompasses four broad text types. By planning curriculum around the four text types I can specifically teach how texts are put together, and in what contexts they can be used. The three women described here did not acquire this critical knowledge of language when they were at school. Genre theory is premised on the idea that until a person knows how and why the texts and discourses of their culture are constructed, they cannot fully participate in mainstream society. Unless I can teach these women the assumptions of genre theory, literacy events and discourses of power will remain inaccessible to them.

Lyn Black says she lost her job because she could not write phone messages or spell words specific to her employment. And Mona Al Rustrom couldn't say it more clearly for us; she wants to know the language of the culture her children are growing up in so she can keep track of them. She needs to know how the language works so she feels empowered in her role as a mother. Katy Lea learnt how to construct a narrative and how to adapt it to the purposes of women's magazines. I doubt any of these women will end up in executive positions of power (neither will I for that matter) so the purpose of literacy classes is not an idealistic one. The purpose of the literacy class is to give the women a knowledge of language that will empower them at a personal and community level.

Because the women describe their literacy in terms of spelling and decoding and also perceive that their weaknesses are to do with decoding, I believe curriculum should support language learning at this level too. My belief is supported by the findings that many students, both male and female, in literacy classes have language processing difficulties, which include difficulties with decoding, memory, organisation, spelling, punctuation and syntax. As a group these same students also have different learning strategies that conventional teaching does not always address.

The CGEA does not prescribe ways of teaching and assessing students' competence at this level, but assumes language processing skills will be taught anyway. Yet because language processing skills are foundational to successful reading and writing, there should be more emphasis on them in the certificate. For this reason also literacy should not be diluted by a flood of other literacies, such as emotional, economic, democratic and visual literacies. As said in the introduction to this paper, these literacies can draw attention and resources away from the teaching of basic skills that students require when learning to read and write.

However, critical literacy and computer technology skills are both intrinsic to participation in modern society. Lyn Black says, "I must read everything or else I feel I'm cheated, or something like that. I just feel that I need to read it myself to know." The feeling of being cheated or of not knowing what other people know is a strong one among students in a literacy class. And if you don't know or don't have the perception of those who generate written texts, you run the risk of being deceived. Women who have been vulnerable in other areas of their lives are likely to feel this particular vulnerability even more strongly. It is important therefore, that critical literacy is addressed in the classroom.

Computer technology is another powerful tool of the modern world that is not easily accessed by women like the three described here. Katy Lea turned up anxiously to her first computer class in a neighbourhood house. She had barely set foot in non-domestic precincts for years, let alone gone near that symbol of advanced society, the computer. She understood that her competence with the computer was evidence that she was intelligent and could be literate and participate in mainstream society.

If technology is to be an integral part of the literacy class, and that is increasingly the case as flexible learning resources increase, then it must also be a part of the teacher's training. With the rate of change in technology much of the training has to be picked up by professional development. Online learning is part of the future in the literacy classroom, and computer literacy is mandatory if women are to be freed from their marginal status. Teachers should therefore be encouraged by employers and policy makers to improve their technological skills.

Professional development, whether it is about technology or other aspects of teaching practice, is important; it keeps teachers in touch with change and encourages them to reflect on their methods. Much of the current funding for professional development goes towards moderation, the checking of standards between providers, rather than towards workshops and seminars about theory and practice. I find most professional development sessions stimulating and I return to the class with renewed energy, which then transfers onto my students.

Documenting the three women's and my own experiences of literacy in Australia was a task I anticipated with excitement. The women concerned were interested and honoured to take part in a study that called on them to express some of the innermost details of their lives. Katy Lea has used her pen name to protect family still living. Lyn Black is a pseudonym. Mona Al Rustrom is happy for her name to be used. Use of a person's name in conversation demonstrates trust and intimacy between the participants, so I think anyone reading this paper should feel honoured too by her choice.

Conclusion

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Little has been written about women and literacy in Australia over the past 30 years although many in the field draw on the work of Pam Gilbert, Barbara Kamler, Jenny Horsman and others to inform their practice. [vii]

The1996 ERIC data base[viii] has a useful discussion of issues regarding women and literacy drawn from the work of Canadian, USA, and Australian writers such as N.A Carmack, S Cornes, B Flint-Coplan, N Gilding, J Horsman, M Norton and S Shore. Susan Imel's ERIC data base summary of issues covers:

- the diversity of purposes in literacy programs for women, which can range through an unquestioning maintenance of the status quo to the promotion of critical literacy;
- the debate about women only classes - some argue that gender and ethnic inclusive curriculum will suffice, others that a necessarily different discourse takes place in women only groups; and
- the (apparently) particularly Australian interest in whether a perceived low value placed on adult literacy education is associated with the predominance of women as teachers in the field.

In short we argue that four fundamental principles are necessary:

> Australian women literacy learners need sustained learning and sustained opportunity to develop the power of critical thinking through reading, writing and speaking English.
>
> They need a choice of settings including community based agencies, TAFE institutes and women only groups.
>
> The texts women literacy learners use and create should open new understandings and new knowledge of the world they live in.
>
> Women literacy teachers need regular paid professional development opportunities to reflect deeply, with other teachers, on the theory as well as the practice of adult literacy education.

References

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[i] *For a summary of this discussion see www.converse.com.au/News/2alnarc.htm*

[ii] *From the statement of purposes in WAVE's Constitution*

[iii] *J. Kirner, The Political Leader: Women and Power, http://www.converse.com.au/Articles/1kirner.htm*

[iv] *J. Kirner and M Rayner, The Women's Power Pocket Book, pp 58-60*

[v] *The authors believe that a choice between ACE, TAFE and school settings is an important one for learners and should be supported through funding policies*

[vi] *The Age, 16 February, 2002*

[vii] *For example, B Kamler, Lessons about language and gender, Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, vol. 17, no. 2. 1994, pp 129-38; and P Gilbert, (Sub)versions: using sexist language practice to explore critical literacy, Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, vol 17, no. 4, 1993, pp323-332; and J Horsman, The Problem of Illiteracy and the Promise of Literacy, in Worlds of Literacy, ed by M Hamilton, D Barton and R Ivanic. Clevedon, Avon, England*

[viii] *at http://ericacve.org/docgen.asp?tbl=tia&ID=96*

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WAVE members are invited to attend a discussion of this paper in Melbourne 6.30-8.30 pm on Friday 1 March. For more information about the discussion, or to send comments, WAVE members can email helenmacrae@bigpond.com.au

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